

# Lawyer becomes champion for abused

BY STAFF WRITER

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For years, memories of sexual abuse at the hands of a Roman Catholic priest lurked inside Mark Furnish like a masked demon — unnamed but wreaking havoc just the same.

A grown man, he would break down in tears and become physically ill when asked to get into a car for a weekend pleasure trip, he says. He has had panic attacks, has screamed out when someone stirred his sleep, and had emotional breakdowns during certain movie or TV scenes.

It was only last spring, as Furnish watched the news on MSNBC, that the demon finally made itself known, he says. Memories came flooding back, memories that he says haunt him still, of weekend car trips to a little cabin in the woods when he was an altar boy and of the roving hands of the man he has accused, his former parish priest, the Rev. Robert O'Neill.

"People often ask me why it took so long for me to come forward, but I honestly know now I had been in denial. I had repressed it. But seeing those news reports, it was like a light had been turned on," said Furnish, 31, now an Albany lawyer who has become among the most public of



**Mark Furnish**

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## Contact info

If you have been abused by a priest and want more information about the support group Mark Furnish is forming, send him an e-mail at: [furnishesq@hotmail.com](mailto:furnishesq@hotmail.com)

those who allege abuse.

Furnish is not alone in his accusations. Eight other victims have made similar charges against O'Neill, both in the press and as part of legal filings in a lawsuit against him. The suit was recently dismissed because, a justice ruled, time for legal action had simply run out years ago. The court did not judge the merits of the case.

Furnish is no longer repressing the past.

In the year since his terrible epiphany, Furnish has become a relative rarity among those who say they are victims of priest abuse, using his name freely in the press, publicly speaking out about his pain and helping other alleged victims to

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deal with their own.

He is organizing male and female victims for mutual support locally, encouraging others to come forward, and working toward legislation he believes will protect children from wayward clergy in the future.

Furnish believes that too many priests worldwide were shuffled by church officials from parish to parish to hide their troubles, church officials whom he believes too easily accepted the word of psychiatrists that the priests had been cured.

Diocese of Rochester spokesman Michael Tedesco said that several pending suits against the diocese prevent him from discussing many specifics. But Tedesco defended the local diocese, saying that Bishop Matthew Clark "always has put children first" and acted decisively to remove O'Neill last year once past abuse involving children came to light for the first time.

"The bishop's track record speaks for itself," he said.

In 2002, saying there was "credible evidence" of sexual abuse of children against O'Neill, Clark removed O'Neill's priestly faculties; O'Neill cannot participate in any ministry, wear clerical clothing or live on diocesan property.

O'Neill, reached by phone at the home of a family friend, declined to comment, saying his attorney had advised him against it.

While Furnish's public testimony has been against O'Neill alone, "coming out," as he calls it, has enabled him to be a resource for more than 50 who say they are victims of priests here and in the Albany area.

At the same time, Furnish and his family have undergone tremendous mental anguish — and some hurtful backlash — in re-living the abuse.

For Furnish, remembering has come in many forms. He has recounted his story to a therapist, whom he credits with helping him come forward, to family and friends and to a special United Nations committee on child rights. He has also written an essay in which he describes a young boy lulled into confusion.

## Church was life

The abuse occurred from the time he was about 12 until he was 15 years old, Furnish alleges, while O'Neill was serving at St. John the Evangelist Church in Greece.

Furnish, who has one sister, grew up in Greece in the 1970s and early 1980s.

From birth, he was immersed with his close-knit family in the Catholic Church, attending weekly Mass and other functions, playing CYO basketball, attending parochial school, serving as an altar boy.

He later attended Cardinal Mooney High School, where he was Student Council president and captain of the cross-country team before the school closed in 1989.

After spending a year at St. John Fisher College, he transferred to the State University of New York's Albany campus, earning a bachelor's degree in political science in 1993. He received a law degree in 1997 and was admitted to the New York state Bar the next year. He works as legal counsel to state Sen. Thomas Duane, D-Manhattan.

While Furnish is now well-versed in the workings of Albany, it is a role that legally prevents him from lobbying for new legislation that would make it

mandatory for priest abuse cases to be reported to law enforcement authorities. And he wants to change statute-of-limitation laws that limit adults suing for childhood abuse.

So Furnish plans to teach other victims here and elsewhere across New York about how to work with their lawmakers and within the Albany process.

"I can use the knowledge I have gained to educate other victims on the ins and outs and how to advocate for new laws," he said.

Those who know him or have worked with him describe Furnish as unwavering in his commitment to fight abuse by priests.

"This coming forward, this reaching out and trying to help others is a sign of a lot of self-examination, therapy and no small amount of courage," said David Clohessy, who heads the Chicago-based Survivors Network for those Abused by Priests, or SNAP, a national organization.

Furnish has become active in the group, as well as in The Linkup, a victims advocacy organization whose annual conference is this week in Louisville, Ky.

Clohessy said Furnish is invaluable in that his public stance gives other victims strength and encourages those who have not yet made themselves — or their abusers — known.

## 'Proud of him'

Standing by Furnish through the ordeal, before and after his realization, has been his wife, Kimberly, also a lawyer.

Her reaction, when he told her his story, was one of "horror," she said. "I was horrified by what happened to him. I am horrified an adult took advantage of a child.

"And I wish it never happened to him so that this didn't have to be his lifelong mission. But I am very proud of him."

"Unfortunately, he has gotten a lot of horrible responses," she added. E-mails and anonymous phone calls and letters have accused Furnish of trying to destroy the Catholic Church or wished he would die, she said.

Said Kimberly Furnish, "I find it absolutely shocking. I had a wonderful Catholic experience growing up and to find the kind of reaction from people who are supposedly Catholic. Mark is trying to help the Catholic religion, but people act as if he is trying to tear down the entire structure."

While he and his wife — and his devout parents — have stopped going to Mass, they are not rejecting their faith. Furnish said he is religious, and prays for healing and for the ability to help others. He said he loves what he calls "the beauty of Catholicism."

He is very angry, however, with the church hierarchy locally and worldwide, which he believes did not act swiftly or decisively enough to get abusive priests away from children.

He speaks of the new struggles that have emerged: the flashbacks, the need for medication, the initial feelings of shame he has overcome with help from others, the hate out there from some, the dinner invitations from some of the couples friends that no longer come.

And of telling those he loved most what had happened so many years ago — of crying together with his wife and mother and asking his father, "Are you ashamed of me, Dad?" to which his father simply replied, "No, son, I love you. We'll get through this." □

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